

Sonoran Desert National Monument Livestock Grazing – Resource Management Plan Amendment and Environmental Assessment

SCOPING OVERVIEW

Background

On January 17, 2001 the Sonoran Desert National Monument (SDNM) was designated by Presidential Proclamation 7397 and stated that “...grazing on Federal lands north of Interstate 8 shall be allowed to continue only to the extent that the Bureau of Land Management determines that grazing is compatible with the paramount purpose of protecting the objects identified in this proclamation.”

‘Objects’ identified in the Proclamation were the following:

- Functioning desert ecosystems;
- Diversity of plant and animal species;
- Saguaro cactus forest;
- Scientific analysis of plant species and climates in past eras;
- Vegetation communities;
- Wildlife; and
- Archeological and historic sites.

On March 31, 2016 the U.S. District Court – District of Arizona (Court), issued a ruling concluding the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) did not provide adequate explanations for determining livestock grazing compatibility on the SDNM in the 2012 Resource Management Plan/Record of Decision. On May 6, 2016 the Court ordered the BLM to complete a new Land Health Evaluation (LHE) and grazing compatibility determination and incorporate those decisions into the 2012 Resource Management Plan by September 30, 2020.

Since the ruling, the BLM developed a new LHE using random plot monitoring protocol to provide for repeatable and unbiased field observations used in integrating desired plan objectives into the new LHE. The BLM provided a 45-day public input period on the new LHE between December 12, 2019 and January 29, 2020. Notification by email or postcard was made to approximately 33 individuals, organizations, and agencies. The BLM received one comment letter from Western Watersheds Project to consider.

The BLM has determined that a resource management plan amendment/environmental assessment (RMPA/EA) is warranted to address the Court remand and evaluate whether any allotments north of Interstate-8 (I-8) within the SDNM would be ‘available’ or ‘unavailable’ for livestock grazing, and whether any changes are needed to Animal Month Units (AUMs) and/or management actions. The Planning Area is defined as approximately 252,460 acres of public land managed by the BLM within the SDNM north of I-8 (Figure 1).

Purpose of Scoping

On March 26, 2020 the BLM published a Notice of Intent (NOI) in the *Federal Register*, announcing the beginning of the 30-day scoping period. The BLM also published a news release. Approximately 67 individuals, organizations and agencies were notified of this scoping period by email or postcard. A copy of the NOI is available on this RMPA/EA website.

The objective of public scoping falls into three broad categories:

1. The **relevant issues** associated with the RMPA/EA;
2. If there are means to **minimize the effects** from the RMPA/EA; and
3. If there are **reasonable action alternatives that meet the purpose and need** of the RMPA/EA the BLM should consider during the environmental analysis.

Preliminary issues to be considered in the RMPA/EA include the following:

- 1. Direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts from livestock grazing on monument objects, other resources, and allowable uses; and
- 2. Impacts to livestock operators.

Preliminary planning criteria include:

- 1. The RMPA/EA will apply to BLM-administered public lands within the SDNM north of I-8;
- 2. The RMPA/EA will consider a range of reasonable alternatives;
- 3. The BLM will consider current scientific information, research, new technologies, monitoring, and coordination; and
- 4. Decisions in the RMPA/EA will comply as appropriate with all applicable law, regulations, policy, and guidance.

Comments received during public scoping and their relevant issues will be summarized in the RMPA/EA. The BLM will address the comments received during scoping and sort them into one of three categories:

- 1. Issues to be resolved in the grazing compatibility analysis;
- 2. Issues to be resolved in the RMPA/EA; and
- 3. Issues beyond the scope of this RMPA/EA.

No scoping report will be published. The BLM does not anticipate any public meeting or open house for this RMPA/EA.

Alternatives

The RMPA/EA will analyze at a minimum, the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts from the following:

- 1. Alternative A: No Action Alternative (Current Management)
Under the 2012 SDNM ROD (Table 2-6 on page 2-63), the allotments within the SDNM north of I-8 were allocated acres for available livestock grazing, except for the Conley Allotment. This alternative was previously analyzed in detail as Alternative E of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS).

Allotment Name	Available (BLM Acres)	Unavailable (BLM acres)
Arnold	1,610	0
Beloat	33,600	0
Big Horn	75,230	16,970
Conley	0	77,170
Hazen	31,930	0
Lower Vekol	14,800	610

Under GR-2.1.4 (page 2-66), 3,318 AUMs are permitted in the SDNM across all five allotments.

- 2. Alternative B: No Grazing Alternative
All allotments within the SDNM north of I-8 would be unavailable for livestock grazing. This alternative was previously analyzed in detail as Alternative D of the 2012 FEIS.
- 3. Alternative C
This alternative would consider and analyze changes to the six livestock grazing allotments in the Planning Area with all allotments available for livestock grazing (the Conley Allotment would be changed from unavailable to available).

Comparison of Preliminary Alternatives

The table below lists how allocation changes would be considered under these three alternatives.

Allotment Name	Alternative A: No Action Alternative (Current Management)	Alternative B: No Grazing Alternative	Alternative C
Arnold	Available	Unavailable	Available
Beloat	Available	Unavailable	Available
Big Horn	Available	Unavailable	Available
Conley	Unavailable	Unavailable	Available
Hazen	Available	Unavailable	Available
Lower Vekol	Available	Unavailable	Available

The table below lists how AUMs would be allocated across all allotments within the Planning Area under these three alternatives.

3/26/2020

Allotment Name	No Action Alternative (Current Management)	No Grazing Alternative	Alternative C
All SDNM allotments north of I-8	3,318 AUMs	0 AUMs	Range from ephemeral to 4,232 ¹ AUMs

After public scoping, the BLM would identify one of the alternatives described above, or a new reasonable alternative identified during public scoping, as the Proposed Action.

Land Use Plan-Level Decisions vs. Implementation-Level Decisions

According to the BLM’s Land Use Planning Handbook (Appendix C, page 15) (2005), allotment-specific grazing management practices including allotment-specific AUMs and range improvements, are considered implementation-level decisions and as such, will not be included in the RMPA/EA alternatives. Those considerations will be made in subsequent allotment-specific NEPA analysis at a later time.

Cooperating Agencies

On January 12, 2020 the BLM sent Cooperating Agency invitations to 16 potential governmental organizations and tribal governments to participate in this RMPA/EA. Under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), State agencies, local governments, and tribal governments may serve as a Cooperating Agency for a planning effort. Criteria for being a Cooperating Agency is: a) jurisdiction by law; or b) special expertise. Listed below in the table is their status.

Government	Invited	Participating
Arizona Game and Fish Department, Region 4	✓	✓
Arizona Game and Fish Department, Region 6	✓	
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arizona Ecological Services	✓	
Arizona State Land Department	✓	
Arizona Department of Transportation	✓	
Arizona Department of Agriculture	✓	
Ak-Chin Indian Tribe	✓	
Hopi Tribe	✓	
Tohono O’odham Nation	✓	
Pascua Yaqui Tribe	✓	
Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community	✓	
Gila River Indian Community	✓	
Maricopa Department of Transportation	✓	
Maricopa County	✓	
Pinal County	✓	

The BLM will continue to outreach to those entities that did not accept the invitation during the public participation process, and consider their input on this RMPA/EA. On March 6, 2020 tribal governments with an affiliation with the Planning Area were notified and provided early information for this RMPA/EA under the provisions of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. On March 17, 2020 the BLM initiated consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office and government-to-government consultation with the tribes.

Preliminary Purpose and Need

The BLM has drafted this RMPA/EA’s preliminary purpose and need:

“The purpose of this action is to consider the compatibility of livestock grazing with the monument objects for which the SDNM was established and amend the 2012 SDNM RMP/ROD.

The need for this action is established in the 2001 Presidential Proclamation, Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, Fundamentals of Rangeland Health (43 Code of Federal Regulation (CFR) 4180), the SDNM RMP (BLM 2012), and the March 31, 2016 ruling by the U.S. District Court – District of Arizona concluding that the BLM did not provide adequate explanations for determining livestock grazing compatibility on the SDNM in the 2012 SDNM RMP/ROD.”

Any reasonable alternative for the BLM to consider would need to meet the purpose and need of this RMPA/EA.

¹ Based on the average perennially authorized or documented actual use AUMs, prorated by acres, between 2007 and 2018 excluding AUMs authorized for ephemeral use and for closed allotments and portions of allotments closed under the Proclamation within the SDNM south of I-8.
3/26/2020

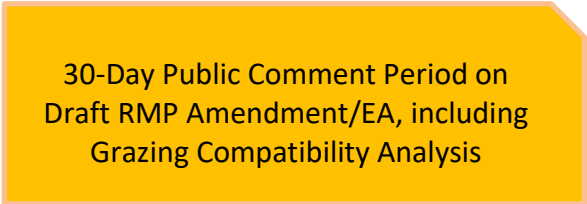
Below is an illustration of the RMP Amendment/EA process (BLM 2005).

PLANNING-LEVEL

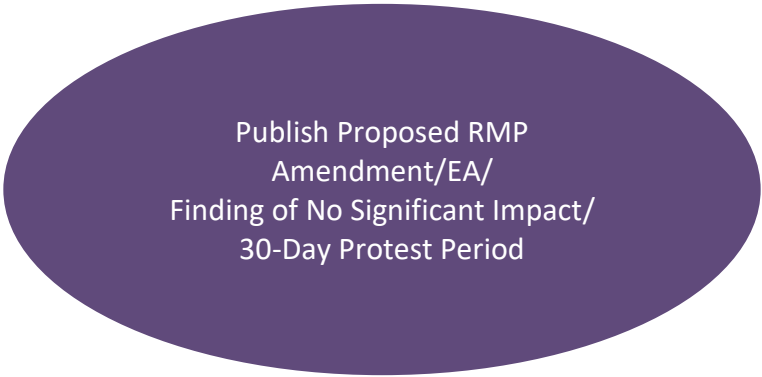
Notice of Intent in *Federal Register*



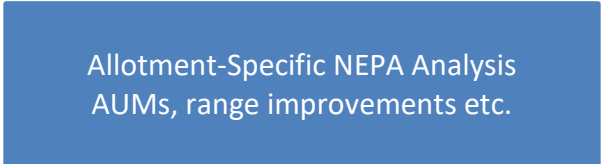
Early Summer 2020



Fall 2020



IMPLEMENTATION-LEVEL



Resource Screening

Based on existing federal law, regulations, Executive Orders, etc., the BLM reviews planning efforts against a list of resources or resource issues that may be present in the Planning Area. Additional resources or resource issues may be considered as a result of public scoping. The Planning Area for this RMPA/EA is defined as approximately 252,460 acres of public land managed by the BLM within the SDNM north of I-8. The following resources or resource issues *may* be present, and *may* warrant further consideration in the upcoming RMPA/EA. A final determination of those resources or resource issues that warrant detailed analysis will be made upon the conclusion of public scoping.

Resource or Resource Issue	Status in the Planning Area
Air Resources	Portions or all of the Planning Area are within a non-attainment air basin for large particulates (PM ₁₀) and 8-hour Ozone (O ₃).
Cultural and Heritage Resources	Cultural sites are present in the Planning Area.
Hazardous Materials and Public Safety	Resource is not present in the Planning Area.
Lands and Realty	Within all or portions of the Planning Area, there are existing rights-of-ways for roads, and underground or overhead utilities.
Livestock Grazing	The Planning Area includes all or portions of the following grazing allotments: Arnold, Beloit, Big Horn, Conley, Hazen, and Lower Vekol.
Minerals Management	There are no notice- or plan-level Mining Plan of Operations within the Planning Area, which is withdrawn from mineral entry. There are no unpatented mining claims within the Planning Area.
Native American Religious Concerns	Access to sacred sites would be considered as a part of government-to-government consultation with tribes with an affiliation with the Planning Area.
Other Designations	There are no Federal Emergency Management Agency designated floodplains in the Planning Area. There are no U.S. Department of Agriculture designated prime or unique farmlands in the Planning Area.
Paleontological Resources	Based on review of the Potential Fossil Yield Classification for the Planning Area, there is low potential for the occurrence of fossils.
Recreation Management	All allotments within the Sonoran Desert National Monument Area (SDNM) are within the SDNM or Backcountry Extensive Recreation Management Areas. Some or all of portions of allotments are within the Juan Bautista de Anza Recreation Management Zone.
Social and Economic Conditions including Environmental Justice	Livestock grazing contributes to the economies of Pinal and Maricopa counties which overlap with portions or all of the Planning Area. There are no disproportionately low income or minority populations in the Planning Area.
Soil Resources	The predominant soil type in the Planning Area is a gravelly-sandy loam (Rilito-Gunsight-Denure-Chuchawalla).
Special Designations	There is no Congressionally-designated Wild and Scenic River in the Planning Area. Portions or all of the Planning Area are within portions of the North and South Maricopa Wilderness areas. There are no Lands with Wilderness Characteristics within the Planning Area. There are no Areas of Critical Environmental Concern in the Planning Area.
Travel Management	A Travel Management Plan was approved in 2012 for the Planning Area, designating routes as open, limited, or closed to travel.
Vegetation Resources, including Wetlands/Riparian Zones and Noxious or Invasive Weeds	The creosote-bursage desertscrub vegetation community is the predominant vegetation community in the Planning Area. There are no U.S. Army Corps of Engineers delineated jurisdictional wetlands (Clean Water Act, Section 404) in the Planning Area. Intermittent streams within the Planning Area do not support riparian vegetation communities. Noxious or invasive weed species, such as Russian knapweed (<i>Acroptilon repens</i>) and red brome (<i>Bromus rubens</i>), are present in the Planning Area.
Visual Resources	Portions or all of the Planning Area is within portions or all of Visual Resources Management Class I and/or Class II, and/or Class III.
Water Resources	There are no Clean Water Act Section 303 (b) impaired waters, within the Planning Area.
Wild Horse and Burros Management	There is no designated Herd Management Area within the Planning Area.
Wildlife, including Special Status Species and Migratory Birds	Species associated with the Sonoran desertscrub vegetation community are present in the Planning Area. Portions or all the Planning Area is within Sonoran desert tortoise (<i>Gopherus morafkai</i>) Category I, II, or III habitats. There is no proposed or designated critical habitat for a federally-listed species within the Planning Area. The Planning Area is within the Sonoran pronghorn (<i>Antilocapra americana sonoriensis</i>) “10(j)” area (experimental, non-essential population).